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Effective Home-School Communication

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Issue Topic: Home-School Communication

Guest Commentary

Not all home-school communication succeeds in supporting student learning. JoBeth Allen of the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia discusses the importance of effective home-school communication. She highlights challenges to achieving meaningful communication and offers reflective strategies for educators working with diverse families.

Those of us in educational settings may feel like we communicate with families frequently and in many ways: through school newsletters, good news (or bad news) calls home, weekly agendas, parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, and notices galore. Those of us with children at home may feel like we receive an avalanche of "communication" in the written material that our children bring home stuffed into their backpacks.

The problem is that we don't always communicate, and when we do, it is not always in ways that support student learning. Schools can establish meaningful home-school dialogue when they expand "communication" to include more than routine practice and, whenever possible, tailor their communication to individual families.

What kind of family-school communication makes a difference?

Research is clear about the kinds of parental involvement that lead to student learning. Henderson and Mapp (2002) analyzed 80 studies of parental involvement in K-12 schools. Some of their key findings provide clear guidelines for effective communication:

- Family involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement.
- Family involvement that supports student learning at home is linked to improved student achievement.
- Families of all cultural backgrounds and education and income levels can have a positive influence on their children's learning.
- Family involvement efforts that recognize cultural and class differences, address family needs, and build on families' strengths are effective in engaging diverse families.

Initiatives that focus on building respectful and trusting relationships among school staff, families, and community members are more likely to be effective in creating sustained connections that support student learning.

Given this research, we as educators can examine our existing practices, such as newsletters and conferences, and revise them in some important ways:

- *Create opportunities for students and families to learn together at home.* Dialogue journals, for example, encourage family members to write about topics such as their response to books that students read at home or how parents use math in their daily home and work lives (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995).
- *Establish respectful two-way communication.* Family visits, informal conversations at students' out-of-school activities, and student-led parent-teacher conferences all help in this effort.
- *Learn together as families and educators.* Learning about each other's cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic worlds helps to create strong bridges for students through culturally relevant curriculum and instruction based on family funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

What challenges do schools and families encounter when trying to develop effective communication?

Sometimes we don't speak the same language—both figuratively and literally. Beyond the critical need for school missives to be written in a family's home language, we need to examine our texts and subtexts. Below are some suggestions for educators to create meaningful home-school communication:

- *Invite dialogue.* Rather than telling parents what they should do (e.g., get their children to behave, come to a meeting, or sign a form), open a conversation about an important topic related to the curriculum, and invite specific family involvement.
- *Monitor the tone and body language of face-to-face interactions.* Help parents to see that we like their children, that we understand their children as learners, and that we are listening to their insights about their children.
- *Empathize.* Show families that we understand and respect demands on their time, finances, and family dynamics.
- *Beware of ghosts.* Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) learned from interviews with parents and teachers that we all bring "ghosts" of past schooling experiences to the conference table. If we are successful in building respectful and trusting relationships, we can name our ghosts and move beyond them to establish genuine two-way communication that supports student learning.

When we listen to and learn from families, incorporate their cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge in curriculum, and develop with families ways they can be actively involved in their children's education at home, we go beyond the good intentions of school-to-home communications and enter into meaningful dialogue that can lead to student learning.

References

González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (Eds.) (2005) *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*. New York: Random House.

Creating Welcoming Schools

Written by JoBeth Allen, with a foreword by Concha Delgado-Gaitan, this book details how diverse families and schools throughout the country have formed partnerships that support and enhance student learning. The genuine partnerships are collaboratively created and constantly reinvented through respectful teacher-family-student relationships.

Offering alternatives to traditional "parent involvement programs," this volume is designed to promote dialogue among three actors in a student's education: teachers who care deeply about students and welcome diverse families as partners, parents who want to be active partners in educating their children, and administrators in diverse schools or districts who knows there is no quick fix for building lasting partnerships among families, schools, and the community.

Allen, J. (2007). *Creating welcoming schools: A practical guide to home-school partnerships with diverse families*. New York: Teachers College Press and International Reading Association.

Shockley, B., Michalove, B., Allen, J. (1995). *Engaging families: Connecting home and school literacy communities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

This article is part of the January 2009 FINE Newsletter. The FINE Newsletter shares the newest and best family involvement research and resources from Harvard Family Research Project and other field leaders. To access the FINE Newsletter Archive, visit www.hfrp.org/FINENewsletter.

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